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Henry Waxman's rich legislative legacy

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Rep. Henry Waxman retires from Congress with two giant legacies: as a master craftsman in the art of cutting the big deal and someone who could throw a potent political punch.

The California congressman, who announced Thursday he'll retire at the end of the current Congress after 20 terms in the House, drew rave reviews for his recurring role as one of the House of Representative's chief watchdogs. He led investigations into the George W. Bush administration's handling of the Iraq War and steroid use in Major League Baseball, often with a visible partisan chip on his shoulder.

But anyone who has worked in the Washington policy trenches over the past four decades — especially in public health and the environment — also will remember Waxman as a legislative maestro who had an instinctive feel for finding the perfect equilibrium to pass landmark legislation.

([Earlier on POLITICO: Henry Waxman to retire](#))

President Barack Obama's first-term agenda certainly wouldn't have been the same without the diminutive Los Angeles lawmaker.

He may stand a mere 5 foot, 5 inches tall, but Waxman's shadow will long hang over the nation's policies for curbing air and water pollution, to limit tobacco use and to expand health care coverage and Medicaid.

"It's not a retirement. It's an institutional sea change," said Drew Altman, the CEO of the Kaiser Family Foundation.

There are many iconic images from Waxman's four-decade Capitol Hill career. His first-floor Rayburn office is full of them, with pictures lining the wall of presidents signing into law many of the bills that Waxman worked on.

His legendary oversight work — The Daily Show's Jon Stewart nicknamed Waxman the "The Mustache of Justice" for grilling senior Bush officials and baseball sluggers like Jose Canseco and Mark McGwire — may best be remembered for his treatment of tobacco executives at a hearing nearly 20 years ago.

([Also on POLITICO: Fluke may seek Waxman seat](#))

Waxman's questions of the witnesses — featured in the Al Pacino film "The Insider" — generated years of damaging disclosures about what the industry knew about the harms of smoking. It eventually led to the FDA getting power to regulate tobacco products.

Other health policies wouldn't be the same without Waxman, ranging from the legal structure that expanded access to affordable generic drugs to rules aimed at stopping abuse at nursing homes. He's credited with being one of the first lawmakers to insist that the nation confront the HIV/AIDS epidemic, to step up research investments, and to pass legislation to begin to provide services to people with the virus

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His fingerprints are also all over comprehensive health reform. President Bill Clinton and first lady Hillary Clinton relied on Waxman with their unsuccessful foray in the early 1990s. He's said the Affordable Care Act, which took shape in the Energy and Commerce Committee, will go down as one of his proudest achievements.

"He's one of the greats," former FDA Commissioner David Kessler told POLITICO. "This country could not have made the progress it did in public health over the last three decades without him."

"Tobacco, AIDS, drug safety, expanding coverage — you name it. Henry did it," Kessler said.

Waxman made his mark early on in his House career as a member of the huge class of "Watergate babies" elected shortly after Richard Nixon's resignation in 1974. A few years later, he successfully challenged a more senior House Democrat for the gavel of a Health and Environment subcommittee packed with political rising stars, including Al Gore, Tim Wirth, David Stockman and Richard Shelby.

From that perch, Waxman battled Ronald Reagan over his calls to loosen parts of the Clean Air Act. He also launched his own investigation into the 1984 disaster at a Bhopal, India, chemical plant by looking at similar facilities in West Virginia. New legislative requirements emerged allowing EPA to collect toxic emissions data.

"All those good laws are on the books largely because of a series of hearings he held when he was chairman in the early '80s," said California attorney Jerry Dodson, one of Waxman's first staff hires who spent a decade working with the lawmaker.

Like Ted Kennedy, Waxman's legacy also includes a large crop of staff alumni who went on to serve in senior policy posts, including White House adviser Phil Schilliro, who was hired as a Waxman intern; Bill Corr, Obama's deputy secretary at the Department of Health and Human Services; and Timothy Westmoreland, an AIDS expert who ran the Medicaid program during the Clinton administration.

Waxman made his mark on the Obama administration with a power play launched just hours after the 2008 presidential election celebration ended in Chicago's Grant Park.

With the quiet backing of then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Waxman again took on a more senior Democrat for a committee gavel. This time, the challenge against Rep. John Dingell for the leadership of the Energy and Commerce Committee would set off an intense internal party battle that pitted Pelosi loyalists against Democratic moderates, many of whom would go on to lose their seats in the 2010 Republican tidal wave.

In the short term, Waxman's victory over Dingell made a big difference in Obama's first term legislative agenda as he worked double time to push the early iterations of Obamacare and a comprehensive climate and energy bill.

For the climate package to even move through the committee, Waxman would need to meet the demands of about a dozen fellow Democrats from districts with large industrial bases. It was a messy effort that produced compromises many environmentalists could barely stomach.

Standing in the House Radio-TV news gallery after one particularly critical negotiation

session, Rep. Rick Boucher, a coal-state Virginia Democrat, announced his endorsement of the bill and read off a long list of changes he'd gotten out of Waxman.

"As Rick gave his comments and he talked about the changes we made, I remember each concession I made," Waxman later told reporters. "And when he talked about things he still wants to discuss, I kept saying to myself, 'Oy.'"

Waxman's climate bill passed the House by only the narrowest of margins but died in the Senate in 2010. The campaign left deep political battle scars, and Democrats haven't tried to tackle the issue in the same way since.

In a statement to POLITICO, Gore called Waxman "one of the most effective legislators and advocates in the modern history of the U.S. Congress."

"His courageous determination to make climate change a priority in a difficult and obstinate Congress has been crucial for our country's progress, and will be sorely missed," the former vice president added.

Obama called Waxman an "extraordinary public servant and one of the most accomplished legislators of his or any era."

"Thanks to Henry's leadership, Americans breathe cleaner air, drink cleaner water, eat safer food, purchase safer products, and, finally, have access to quality, affordable health care," the president said.

Other tributes to Waxman poured in from both Democrats and Republicans who had been among his primary political opponents.

"Henry has made it his life's work to fight to protect the health and well-being of both our people and our planet, and we are all better for his hard work and many accomplishments throughout the years," said Dingell, the Michigan-based dean of the House who famously fought Waxman over many air pollution issues and attempts to increase automobile fuel efficiency standards.

Rep. Fred Upton (R-Mich.), the current chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee, said his "proudest collaboration" dated to the 1990s when they worked together to double research funding at the National Institutes of Health.

Waxman's legacy also extends to the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, which he renamed upon becoming chairman during the final two years of the George W. Bush administration. His successor, Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.), said Waxman "set important precedents and innovated new investigative tools such as the use of subpoenas for closed-door depositions."

Issa also said there are several ongoing investigations started during Waxman's tenure — albeit with a Republican president — that continue to this day, including reviews of how the White House uses its political office and nonofficial email accounts tapped for official government business.

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